by lecia parks langston, economist

Staying Flexible

Almost any list of job-seeking tips for seniors includes a section on keeping your skills current and remaining flexible. With rapid increases in technology, today's workplace requires workers who are willing to learn and change with the job. To stay employable, older workers must be continually updating their skill set.

Some Tips

Take advantage of available training opportunities. If you are already employed, make sure to get that competitive edge by taking any training your employer offers. Be the first to learn the updated software package. Don't hang on to the old technologies.

Examine and determine your own skill-set needs. Before you can update your skill set, you need to know what skills are in demand. Find out the cutting edge skills for your occupation and learn them.

Be sure to boost your software skills. Jobs ranging from clerical work to retail sales now require some expertise with computers—particularly a working knowledge of the Microsoft Windows environment. Find out what the in-demand software skills are.

You may find related tutorials offered by area community colleges, your local library, embedded in the software or on the Web. "If people don't have these skills, they're shooting themselves in the foot," says career counselor Linsey Levine of CareerCounsel.

Conquer your fear. Don't be afraid to take a class at the local community college or through continuing education programs. More and more older students are upgrading their skills. Chances are you won't be the only "older" student in the class.

Know at least the computer basics:

• Basic skills to operate a computer, such as handling a computer mouse, typing on a keyboard, and navigating file systems and menus.

• Microsoft Office programs, with particular attention to Word, Excel and PowerPoint—roughly in that order.

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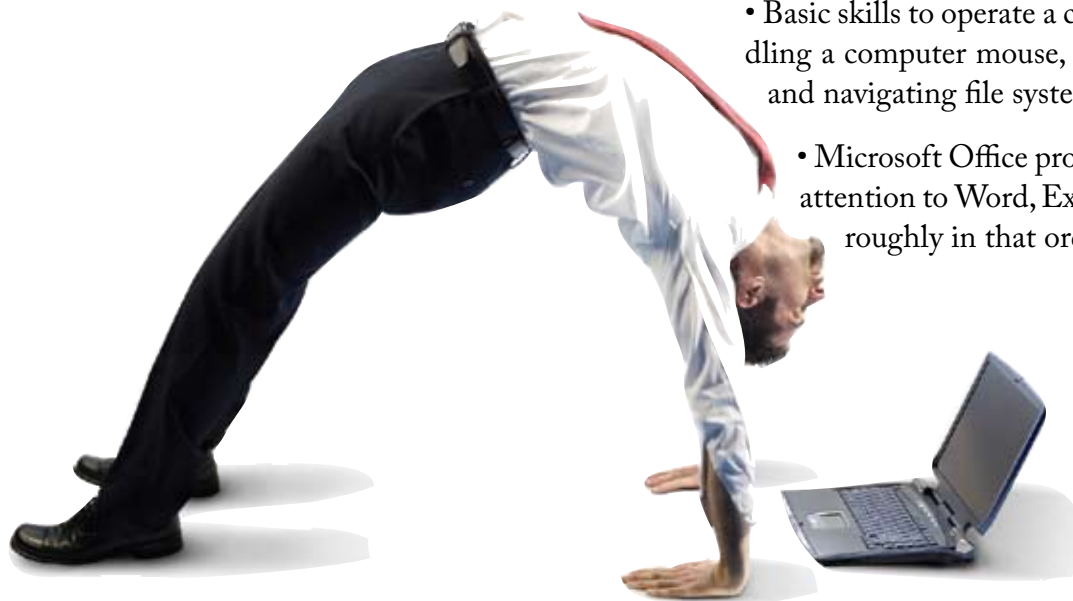
• Essential Internet skills, such as e-mail, web browsing and searching.

Enlist others in getting started. Find a reverse mentor—a younger person who can guide you in updating your skills. When it comes to computers and software, your children, grandchildren or friends can be a great resource. If you aren't sure your skills are up-to-date, you might want to visit a temporary employment agency and take their tests.

Search out resources for training. There are an amazing number of resources for upgrading your skills—particularly your computer skills. Often training is free or close to it. Libraries, senior centers, learning centers, adult or continuing education programs, community colleges and online tutorials can all help you upgrade your skills. A library is often the best starting point, as libraries typically have computers available for patrons' use and may even offer brief computer classes (or know of the best local options).

Once you take training, be sure to practice. Any skill not put to use will deteriorate and evaporate if it isn't used. Plus, the best way to learn a software package is to actually use it in several projects.

Be sure to market your new skills. New skills will aid you only if you let people know you have them. You might want to think about two things: experience and work samples. Volunteer work can help increase your skill levels. When you update your skills as technology advances, it shows that you are someone who loves learning. It will give employers the impression that you are resilient and adaptable.

Make sure your resume and the way you send it reflect your skills. If you can't e-mail your resume, it signals that you may not be wired to the Internet or comfortable using e-mail. It also indicates you don't understand that recruiters need resumes that are unformatted (no bold, underline, fancy fonts, etc.) so they can search the text.

facts

• In 2006, older Americans—those 65 years and older—represented 12 percent of the U.S. population. In Utah, this group comprised 9 percent of the population.

• In the U.S. there are 138 older women for every 100 older men. In Utah, the ratio measures 124 older women for every 100 older men.

• Older U.S. women make up 14 percent of the female population compared to Utah where older women make up 10 percent of the population.

• Since 1900, the share of Americans 65 years and older has tripled from 4.1 percent to 12.4 percent in 2006.

• Nationally, individuals between the ages of 55 and 64 comprise 11 percent of the population. In Utah, they show an 8-percent share of the population.

• Men 65 and older make up 11 percent of the male population in the United States compared to Utah where older men make up 8 percent of the population.

• Baby boomers will be responsible for the next population boom—in seniors. The older population will expand rapidly between 2010 and 2030 as the U.S. baby boom generation reaches and surpasses 65.

• The U.S. population 65 and over is expected to increase by 15 percent between 2000 and 2010 and by 36 percent between 2010 and 2020.

• By 2030, the older population is expected be almost twice the number in that age group during 2005. By 2030, older Americans should account for about one-fifth of the U.S. population.